

BEST CAPTAINS: A SURVEY OF CHARACTERISTICS AND SKILLS OF AIRLINE CAPTAIN EXCELLENCE

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Motivation for this Study

- **Society/Press is focused on extraordinary events**
- **Vast majority of operations are ordinary**
- **Excellence under the normal daily environment has not been well studied**



Southwest Airlines overview



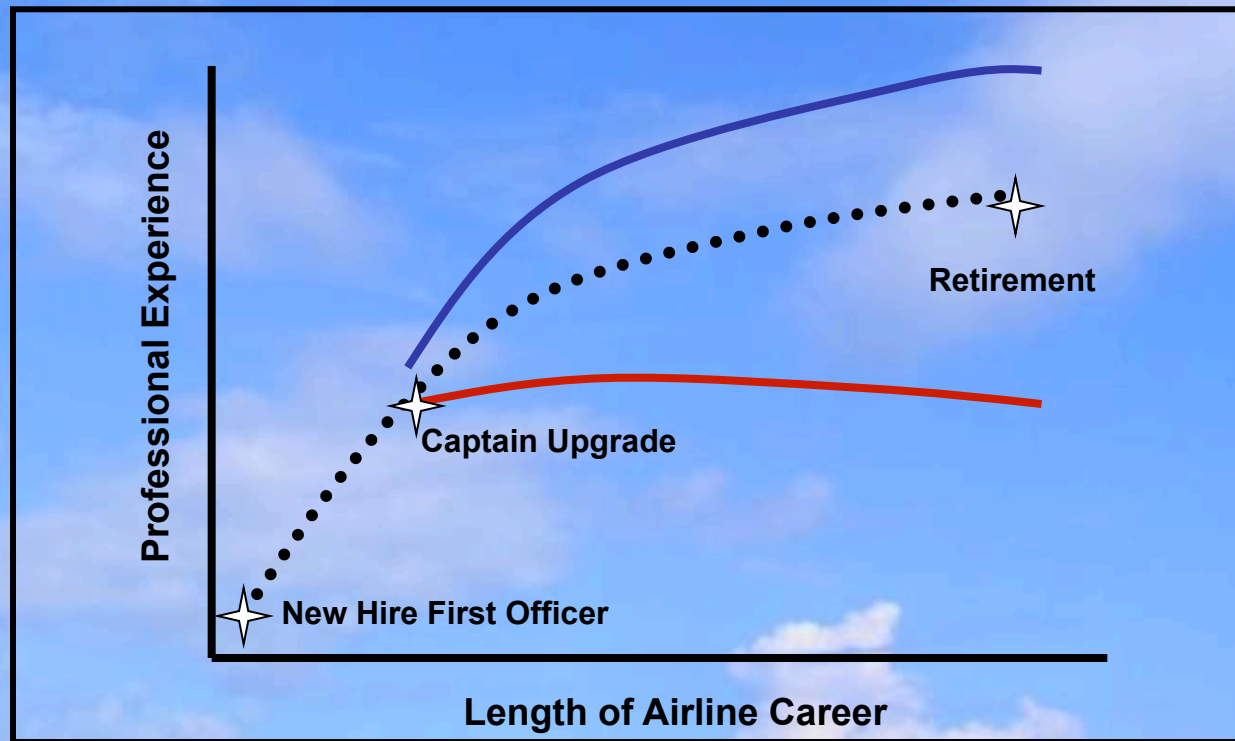
550 B-737 aircraft
3400+ daily flights to 72 cities
6000+ pilots in 8 crew bases



140 B-737 and B-717 aircraft
70 cities
1800+ pilots in 3 crew bases



Career Progress and Professional Job Skills



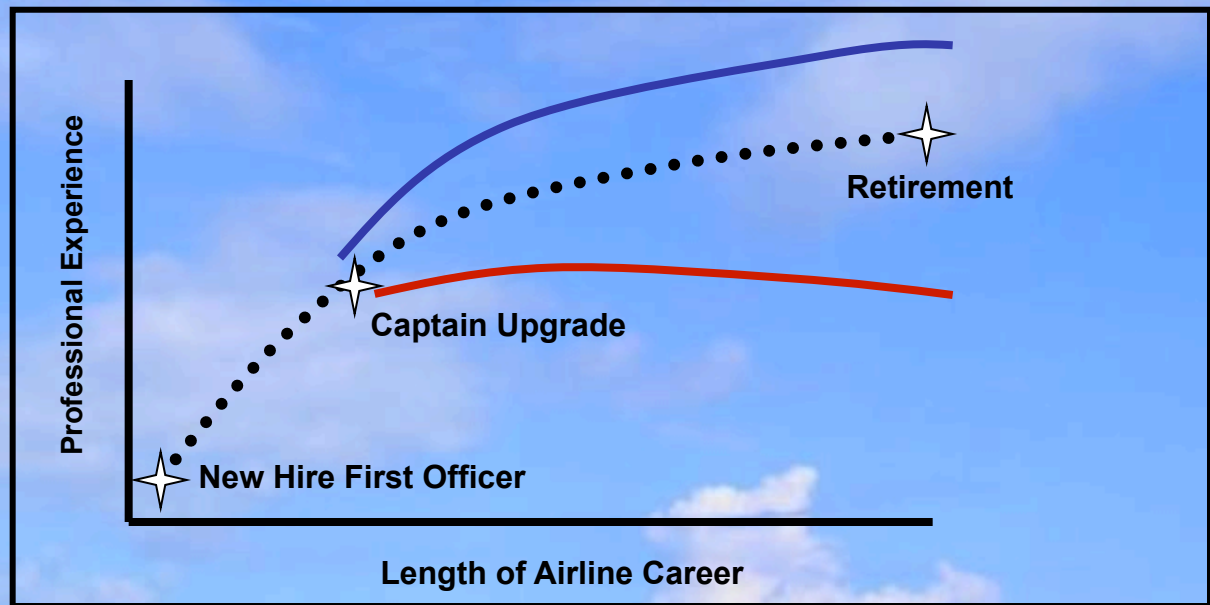
What explains the variance?

- Human tendency to ease off following the attainment of a goal**
- Pursue growth in other areas**
- Lack of growth promoting conditions in the organizational environment**



Question?

How do you promote professional growth?



First step

**Determine those qualities that
you wish to promote within the
pilot group**

*What is the Standard of
Excellence?*



Who is the target group?

CAPTAINS

- Captain culture drives the culture of the rest of the pilot group
- Captains exhibit the greatest variance of professional growth



Who are the best people to identify Captain excellence?

FIRST OFFICERS!!

- Greatest frequency of observation**
- Most “naturalistic” environment**
- All experienced Captains/Aircraft
Commanders**
- Not shy – very little distortion**



Survey Plan

- Survey the First Officers – define traits and characteristics
- Survey the “Best Captains” – techniques and best practices
- Publish results



Survey Product

List the names/numbers/domicile of 1, 2 or 3 Captains that you consider exemplify the finest line operational skills and practices at the airline. Please consider the following areas: flight management, flying skills, situational awareness, open communications, team building, CRM environment, conflict resolution, decision making, instructional ability, and mentoring.

Please limit your selections to those Captains that you have personally flown with for at least one multi-day pairing. Include the Captain's employee number, if needed.

1. _____ / _____ / _____ (Name/Number/Domicile)
2. _____ / _____ / _____ (Name/Number/Domicile)
3. _____ / _____ / _____ (Name/Number/Domicile)

Please identify some of the specific outstanding qualities that these Pilots demonstrate. What makes them rise to the top of your list? Use the back or extra pages, if desired.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



Survey Results

- **380 Captains received one or more votes**
- **In each crew base – one or more Captains received multiple votes**
- **No difference between First Officer groups**



Data analysis – traits of excellence

- **Flight Management**
- **Flying skills**
- **Situational Awareness**
- **Open Communications**
- **Team Building**
- **CRM Environment**
- **Conflict Resolution**
- **Decision Making**
- **Instructional Ability**
- **Mentoring**
- *Professionalism*
- *Experience*
- *Personality*
- *Technical Expertise*
- *Company Asset*
- *Humor*
- *Easy-going nature*



Survey Results

Top tier – technical expertise, promoting CRM environment, personality (12% each)

Second tier – professionalism, flying skills, instructional ability, easy going nature (8-9% each)

Third tier – flight management, open communications, team building, company asset, humor (4-5% each)

Fourth tier – experience, situational awareness, conflict resolution, decision making, and mentoring (0-2% each)



Conclusions

**Technically competent,
Psychologically confident,
and promote an effective CRM
environment**



Follow-on “Best of the Best” Captains Surveys

**Open ended essay surveys –
designed to capture best practices**



Follow-on Captains Surveys

7 operational questions

- First impressions**
- Open communications**
- Team building**
- Instruction/mentoring**
- Personality**
- Professionalism**
- Deliberate and predictable**



Follow-on Captains Surveys

3 situational questions

Open-ended essay

**How do you view your role as the Captain?
How do you get things done? What are your
personal goals as the Captain? How do you
know when you have succeeded as a Captain?**



Articles and follow-on

Series of articles in SWAPA's
Reporting Point newspaper

Incorporation in Captain
upgrade

Positive feedback



Current Project – The Professionalism Council

- **Pilot Professionalism Council**
 - **Develop a shared model of the measure of excellence**
 - **Domicile-based Professionalism Council**



Professionalism Council Creed

To promote professionalism, we will:

- Cultivate leadership based on the Golden Rule by demonstrating compassion and respect
- Support flight ops priorities of safety, customer service, and efficiently on time
- Nurture excellence through personal growth and life long learning
- Honor integrity
- Encourage open communications
- Preserve and enhance the Southwest Culture



Professionalism Council Projects

Selected 5 program ideas

- Identity promotion
- “Myth Busters” article series
- Improved Flight Attendant team building
- Improved ops/ramp team building
- Better recognition of pilot excellence





Questions?





Professional challenges of a single-type carrier

- *Two-step career progression*
- *Clear lack of variety/challenge*
- *Environment promotes stasis*



Survey Execution

- *Box-stuff surveys*
- *Promotion through SWAPA pubs*
- *Answer questions on forum*
- *Collect results*
- *Publicly acknowledge winners*



Conclusions

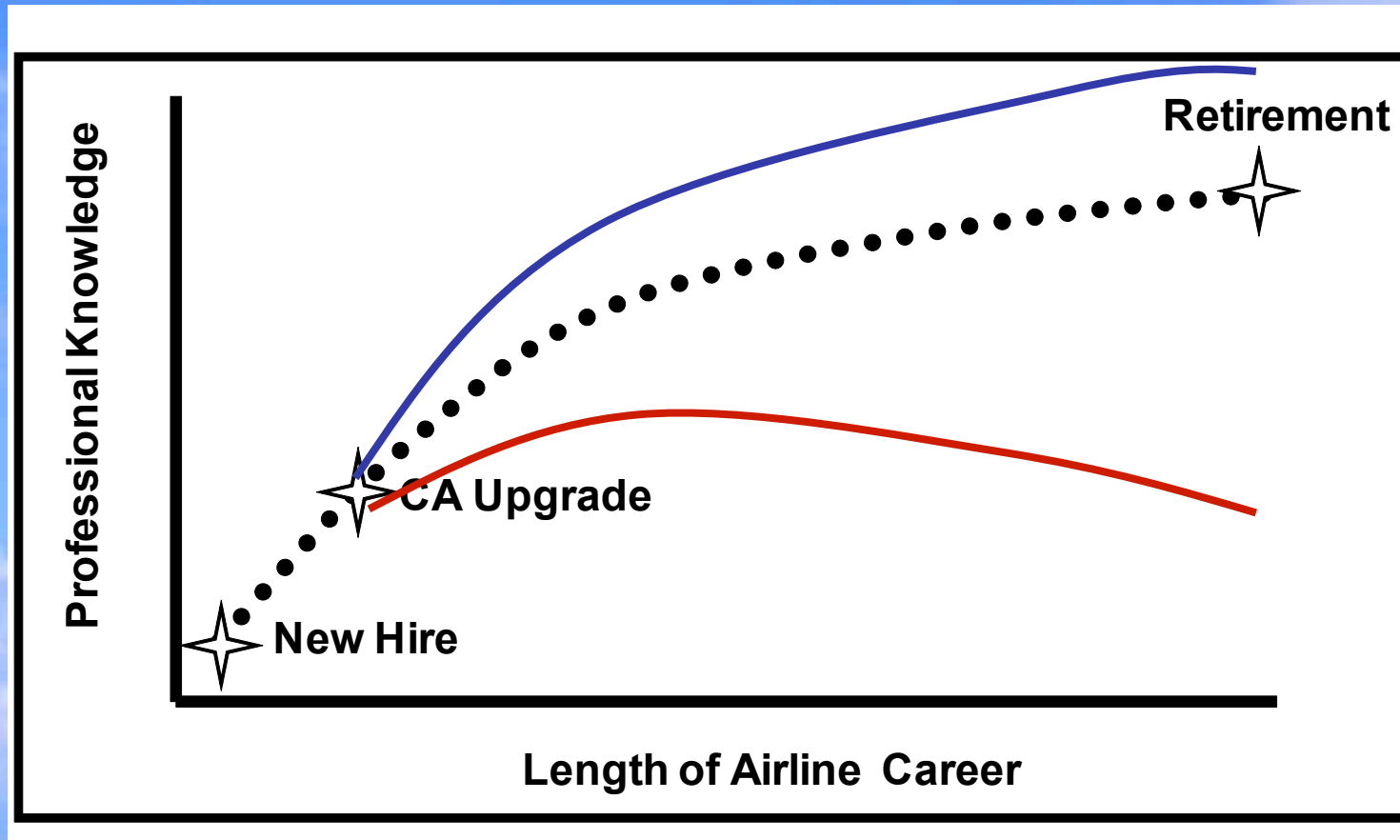
Technical expertise is valued over experience, flight management, situational awareness, and decision making

CRM environment is valued over open communications, team building, and conflict resolution

Personality is valued highly in all measures

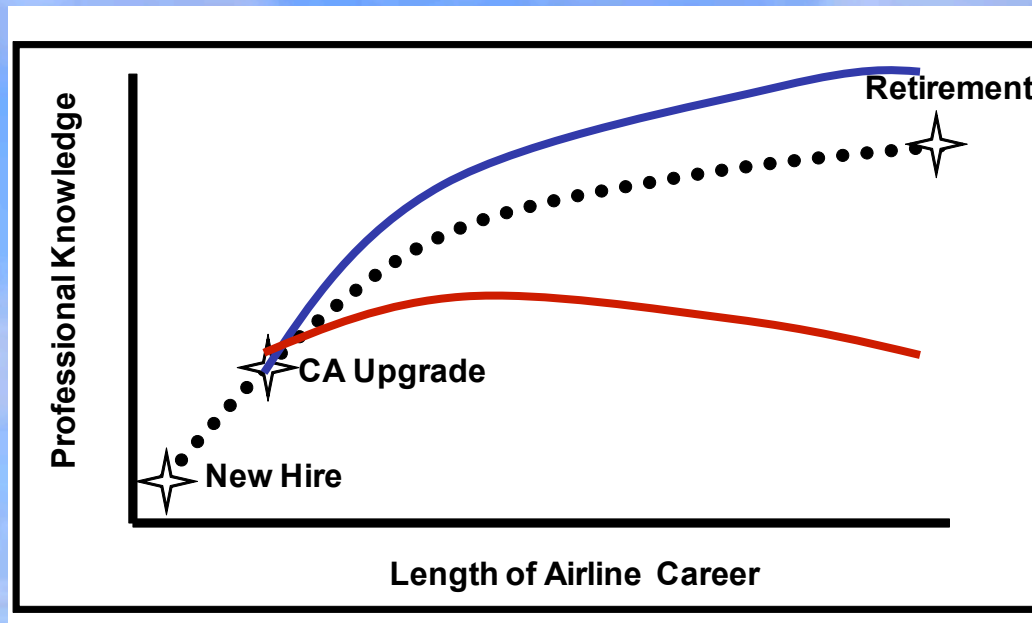


Career Progress and Professional Job Skills



Question?

How do you promote professional growth?



Why does this environment lack growth promotion?

*- Air carrier industry structure
promotes minimalism*

-- Cost savings

-- Union system

-- Lack of emphasis on excellence

